Using a portfolio of evidence in a community-based project module: reflection in perspective

PH v/d Westhuizen*
Dr H Kesa
University of Johannesburg, South Africa
(011) 559-1157 landline

Corresponding author*

Abstract

Community-based learning is a relatively new field in South Africa. It has only been extensively included in academic programmes at universities for about fifteen years.Students have to make a positive contribution to individuals in their communities (Dukhan 2008:21) and develop a combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation in order to make a difference, and to promote the quality of life in a community (O Connor 2006: 52).Too often assessment reflects on a single quantitative measure or symbol to indicate a level of achievement. This aggregate does not, however, indicate the student's particular weaknesses and strengths, and whether or not he or she possesses competencies in a specific aspect. A more objective method/procedure of reporting assessment on levels of achievement and competency obtained is the compilation of a portfolio. The main aim of this paper is to provide some guidelines for the compilation and implementation of portfolios as a tool in authentic assessment for the student, but also acts as a document that would guide a community into the sustainability of the project.

Introduction

A quote from Samuel Purchas, a seventeenth-century writer and explorer states: "By speech, we utter our minds once, at the present, to the present, as present occasions move … us: but by writing, Man seems immortal" (Purchas 1965, 486).

The need expressed in service-learning practice to help students to *integrate their experience* into the learning process and to move from *dependent to more independent/self-regulated* learners has become clichés often heard in academic circles. Unfortunately they often remain lip service to an ideal which seems to elude many service-learning practitioners.

Several excellent definitions of service-learning have been developed, all incorporating the portfolio concept.

Service-learning is defined by Jacoby (1996, 5) as: *"A form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development.* **Reflection and reciprocity are key concepts of service-learning**.*"*

This definition points out the importance of the co-ordinator's intentional integration of service-learning and learning to the students. This definition also emphasises the significance of student's time spent in reflection and the development of insight regarding their time spent in the community.

Bringle and Hatcher (1995) underscored the importance of contemplating by stating that opportunities for reflection allow students to deepen their understanding of

portfolios and to develop a sense of civic responsibility.

Six characteristics of service-learning were identified, which distinguishes it from experiential learning and community service. These characteristics suggest that service-learning must be developed in close relationship with the community where the service is to be performed (Weigert 1998). It also points out the importance of obtaining feedback from both participants. The Oxford Dictionary defines the word "feedback", as "*information about the result of an experiment".*

Bringle and Hatcher (2005: 39) also state that although there are many perspectives from which community engagement can be evaluated (funders, community impact, institutional goals), there should be multiple sources of evidence on the impact of the intended stakeholders in order to make a strong case for documenting civic engagement as scholarship.

Therefore the use of portfolios in the service-learning environment can be seen as a fresh breeze with the promise of contributing to the ideals we strive for through this paper.

Literature review and clarification of terms

What is a portfolio?

It is of the utmost importance that one defines this concept totally before the new concept could be introduced. Paulson; Paulson & Meyer (1991:60) define a portfolio as a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits the student's efforts, progress and achievements in one or more areas. The collection must include student participation in selecting contents,

the criteria for selection, the criteria for judging merit and evidence of student self-reflection. A portfolio provides a complex and comprehensive view of student performance in context. It is a portfolio when the student is a participant in, rather than the object of assessment. It provides a forum that encourages students to

develop the abilities needed to become independent and self-directed.

How then would the community understand this concept, the portfolio? Is it merely an academic statement for the student? This paper also addresses the need of involving the community. The key concepts in this definition, (Paulson; Paulson & Meyer 1991:60) are purposeful collection; student work; showing efforts, progress and achievement; participation; criteria for selection and judging merit; evidence of self-reflection; comprehensive view of performance; a forum for independent, self-directed learners. If the claims made, as above mentioned, in the definition are true, the portfolio experience should provide students with an opportunity to become actively involved in their studies to become independent, self-directed learners. This portfolio is then an academically driven tool, guided by mentors and academic staff, the community can benefit from this to a great extent. Several studies highlight the importance of identifying and analysing needs before any intervention takes place (Barbie and Mouton 2002; Petersen 1998: Turrell 1980). In support of the needs analysis the following question can be posed: If in the process of service-learning we are not hearing the individual service recipients' voices and are not addressing their long-term needs, whose voice and needs are of utmost concern? (Nduna & Maybach 1996:43) Supporting the same view Mouton and Wildschut (2002) attribute the failure of some SL programmes in South African Higher education institutions to the real community need.

Discussion

This paper illustrates that a core section of the above mentioned information should

be available to the community, to be utilised as a guideline to carry on with the project. In most cases the completed portfolio would be to the standards set out by the academic staff, with academic language and input that the community

cannot understand. The project would not benefit from this.

The portfolio, as an authentic assessment tool, provides the opportunity to assess a student's performance in a context similar to that encountered in real service-learning, which would include basic skills such as their ability to:

- Frame problems (after research has been done in the community)
- Find information (be sensitive to how this is carried out)
- Evaluate alternatives (should take place in group discussions)
- Create ideas and actions to be taken
- Invent new approaches to sensitive issues
- Plan cooperatively
- Analyse
- Solve problems at hand.

Therefore, the focus in the portfolio will be on assessing the students' performance and development, rather than merely their ability to recall and recognise. They are given the opportunity to provide evidence of reflection and self-assessment.

The student will also have to remember and concentrate on the fact that the community must be able to understand the outcome of the portfolio and its implementation.

Confirmation of this type of portfolio learning would be classified as:

- Personal and professional development
- Attitudes towards research
- Attitudes towards social relevance

(This is based on our interactions with the EP Bauman School in Brixton, Johannesburg, during 2008).

Our main purpose was to investigate the problems the learners had in the school in

accepting discipline. The learners were exposed to a great deal of 'wrong food', obtainable from the shop on the school premises. Learners were also dominated

by influences from outside the school to deliberately ignore discipline. Personal and professional development was obvious in the groups that utilised group work. (Brockbank & McGill 1999: Bennett, Dunne & Carré 2000) There was excitement amongst students who expressed interest in research excursions and the development of service-learning programmes. They worked long hours outside class times, and went to great trouble to collect and produce creative and authentic learning materials. They utilised group roles to a great extent; sometimes working together and sometimes individually. The students were also able and willing to reflect on all these aspects – a clear indication of an inclination towards service-learning.

Students' attitudes towards research changed drastically. Initially the students did not know what was expected of them. They were novices at using action and developmental research as an approach, and complained that they did not understand what was required of them. After further discussions and firsthand investigation, they produced research reports of a good quality and showed an increased interest in action and developmental research as a tool.

Moreover, students' perceptions of and attitudes towards social relevance were improved. It was particularly obvious in students' increased knowledge about various aspects related to service-learning and issues through their experiences at EP Bauman School. (Although contact times were limited in 2008, as this was our research year, these contact times with our students and the learners from EP Bauman School proved this to us.)

Unique Features

Compiling the portfolio

Although students will work towards a final product, the process is of equal importance. In other words the community must be able to follow the procedures with the group of students. Students will be

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able to investigate how their skills have changed over time, rather than just evaluating the final product.

Very often in a traditional teaching/learning environment, learning takes place where the task or goal is determined by the lecturer. The plan of action for reaching the goal is often prescribed and so are the assessment strategies. The learner is only involved in carrying out the plan.

The proposed structure shown in this paper will show that the student will have to have the involvement and understanding of the community embedded in this entire process. Not only will the student be assessed, but the involvement within the community could be measured as the project unfolds. (Appendix 1)

With the portfolio, the ideal is to involve students in all of the following activities:

- Deciding on tasks or goals (group activity)
- Planning the stages of various tasks (individually and in groups)
- Carrying out plans and adjusting them as necessary (community involvement)
- Assessing the success of tasks (results measured to the approval of the community)

Portfolio work unfolds, starting with ideas and plans, changing into drafts, undergoing revision, settling into its near-final form and zigzagging between these different moments as well. The process of refinement and improvement will therefore be a crucial aspect of the development of a portfolio.

Students are asked to reflect critically on specific aspects of learning as they work through the course. By asking them to critically reflect on what they have learned, the role of reflection in learning is promoted when they are asked to answer

questions about why and what they are learning. This is a process-oriented approach which is part of any portfolio development.

Items to be included in a portfolio:

Observations, rough drafts, summaries from meetings held with the community, mind maps, (new concepts), feedback from group meetings, final copies of work, an action plan, self-edited work, work-in-progress, self-reflected entries, checklists, contacts made with companies to support the project, surveys of study cases, goals and objectives.

Although students should use their own discretion when deciding what items to include in their portfolio, the lecturer should state the minimum requirements, such as items which are indicative of their active participation and learning throughout the course and which reflects the attainment of their personal objectives and the service learning outcomes.

Other items to include

Students should be encouraged to choose any other related/applicable work. Apart from topics already mentioned, the following could be encouraged for use:

- Shows evidence of learning
- Found the project interesting
- Shows work-in-progress with written plans for revision
- Found the project difficult
- Shows their ability to apply particular principles
- Shows their problem-solving ability
- Enjoyed doing the project

It is also important that students develop a rationale for selecting any of the above materials. Answering the following questions may help them develop the rationale (Shackelford 1996:32):

- Why did I decide to include this particular item?
- Does this show growth in my project? How and what?
- What skills or abilities do I wish to document?
- What evidence can I include to show the sustainability of the project?

- Do materials adequately and accurately demonstrate my abilities?
- Does the portfolio reflect what I have learned and my ability to transfer, integrate and use it to solve problems?

Evaluation

- Encourage project documentation (e.g. record the process undertaken and the key lessons – success and failure, so that there is an effective feedback mechanism). This al is easily to be subtracted from our one page assessment tool, (appendix 1).
- Transfer learning from existing projects to other disadvantaged communities, e.g. how the project started, the successes and failures, so that any duplication is avoided and resources effectively used.
- Using research and quality management, evaluate service learning projects and provide regular reports.
- This assessment tool would also clearly indicate if this project would be sustainable or not.

Conclusion

It is clear that SL is not easy to plan and implement as it involves partners with different backgrounds, philosophical understandings and interests Although the problems related to the planning and implementation of SL are great challenges to higher education, the positive outcomes of SL outweigh the negatives ones. It would be a good idea to regard the problems of partnership oriented community-based learning as a learning process that needs continuous reflection, evaluation, passion and support. In this process universities are learning to work with communities and communities are also learning to work with universities.

Portfolio work could and should be an enjoyable experience for the student. It will also uplift the community's participation in the project if they are all on board from the beginning. It is therefore important to provide students with as many guidelines (not always rules!) as possible on how to go about compiling a portfolio. Do not assume that students will know how to deal with it. Be explicit in guiding them through the process and the result could be as delightful and welcoming to the lecturer as it is to the community!

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Barber, Benjamin (1984) "every human being, given half a change, is capable of the self-government that is his or her natural right, and thus capable of acquiring the judgement, foresight, and knowledge that self-government demands" (p.13).

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Implications/Issues
Appendix 1 **Assessing learning outcomes in the service learning field**

Outcomes (What knowledge, competence, and skills do they have)	Possible Criteria Evidence of their ability to:	Examples Evidence	Community	Performance: (The extent to which the portfolio provides evidence)					
				Very high	High	Medium	Low	Very low	Not shown
The ability to communicate with the group and reflection to the community	Structure the work logically	The student have selected an appropriate framework for the project	Will this benefit the community?						
	Provide an overview of the outcome of the project	Introductory section or paragraph providing an overview of what is to come	Community must relate to the proposed project						
	Move concepts and ideas logically from one phase to another	Logical flow of ideas and/or arguments which is easy to follow	Are the group listening to the needs of the community?						
	Use academically acceptable language	Use language applicable to the task: (considering a short translation into the language of the community)	Language barriers, are we getting the message to the entire community?						
	Feedback and contact sessions with community	How was this conducted?	Was the community involved, interactions?						
	Feedback to academic staff	Presentation skills	Was the community involved in this process?						
Learn collaboratively with the academic staff	Work collaboratively with the lecturer in the learning process	By identifying his/her ability to work with the community	Did the community learn through this process?						
Take risks while developing creative solutions	Take risks in his/her search for solutions, answers, etc.	By not be afraid to tackle the unknown, to come up with unique/individulised solutions to problems	To make sure that the risks taken will not effect the community in a negative way						
Assume responsibility for his/her learning	Demonstrate his/her willingness to assume responsibility for his/her learning	By including items which indicate the students willingness to do more than what is expected, not just another portfolio	Did the community buy into this project?						

Very high:	**(7)**	**Excellent performance, exceeded all expectations.**	**Low:**	**(4)**	**Barely met results/targets set, acceptable but improvement**
High:	**(6)**	**Above average achievement, went the extra mile.**	**Very low:**	**(3)**	**Did not meet results, definite improvement required.**
Medium:	**(5)**	**Achieved results/targets / target set, satisfactory performance.** **Not shown:**		**(2)**	**Very poor performance, totally unacceptable.**